

Message

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Sent: 7/5/2016 12:53:27 PM
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Attachments: PolyMet will not protect Minnesota's waters MinnPost.pdf

If Pebble wants its mine to go through federal review, it should just submit a plan - members of the U.S. House of Representatives should quit giving the company a forum to berate EPA for doing the job Congress mandated it to do.

Alaska Dispatch News (Anchorage, AK) - July 4, 2016

• *Author/Byline: Kimberly Williams*

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Last week the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on the proposed Pebble mine. It couldn't have been scheduled at a worse time. Everyone in Bristol Bay is busy filling their nets, smokehouses and freezers with salmon for personal use, and trying to fill bank accounts with money made from catching salmon.

Despite the terrible timing, I was honored to be invited to testify and made time to go to Washington, D.C. After all, our region depends on this fishery for our lives and livelihoods.

To many members of the committee, Bristol Bay is a far-off place they only know about because Pebble wants to build a mine there. But to me, and to others in the region, the Bay is our home, and we must be ready for the 46 million salmon headed our way, or miss out on an entire year's worth of benefits.

Although the hearing was ostensibly about the role of the National Environmental Policy Act in the permitting process, it was really just another chance for Pebble to claim it's been unfairly treated by the Environmental Protection Agency. The company claims EPA's use of the Clean Water Act to place restrictions on mine-waste disposal in our salmon spawning grounds is unfair, and it should first be allowed to go through the environmental review process called for by NEPA.

As some members of the committee quickly realized, Pebble's position is ridiculous. If Pebble wants its mine plan to go through NEPA review, all it has to do is submit a permit application.

Year after year, going as far back as 2004, Pebble has said it was poised to submit its application. And year after year, as the public, scientists and investors all realized how stupendously wrong it would be to develop a huge open-pit mine in the headwaters of the Bay, Pebble delayed, hoping it could at least control the politics of the process.

After a decade of uncertainty about the threat to our fishery, nearly all the stakeholders in Bristol Bay – our tribes, Native corporations and commercial and sportfish groups – asked EPA to take proactive steps to protect the salmon fishery from the proposed Pebble mine. The EPA is legally obligated to respond to our requests, and it did so. The rest is a matter of public record. After a lengthy and rigorous scientific assessment and unprecedented levels of public input, EPA proposed minimum reasonable restrictions on mine-waste disposal to ensure the future of our fishery.

No, Pebble isn't the victim here. And members of the U.S. House of Representatives should quit giving the company a forum to berate EPA for doing the job Congress mandated it to do – protect clean water and the fisheries. For us in the Bay, this makes a whole lot of sense, as protecting our water means protecting our salmon, our culture and our economy.

I've lost track of the number of times I've traveled to D.C. to tell our story, defend our wild salmon, and promote a fishery that feeds the world. The fishery is a blessing to our people, and I'm proud to be a part of it. I invite any House committee to hold a field hearing in Alaska so they can see for themselves the importance of our fishery, instead of criticizing us from afar.

Rather than muddle the issue with more politics, Congress should let EPA finish its 404(c) process, and give certainty to our people that our salmon resource can support us for generations to come, as it has supported our culture for millennia, and our economy for 130 years and counting. We will not rest until the threat posed by Pebble is put to bed for good.

Kimberly Williams is the executive director of Nunamta Aulukestai, a coalition of 10 Alaska Native village corporations and tribes.